

October 6, 2005: NORTON SUPPORTS MARRIAGE ACCOUNTS

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NORTON SUPPORTS MARRIAGE ACCOUNTS TO CONTINUE HER LONG STRUGGLE FOR STRONG BLACK FAMILIES

Washington, DC—Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC) today testified at a Senate D.C. Appropriations Subcommittee hearing on Marriage Development Accounts (MDAs), a federally-funded program for the District to promote and save marriages by eliminating finances as a factor for low-income D.C. residents. The MDAs were proposed by Subcommittee Chair Senator Sam Brownback (R-KS) after consultation with Norton and city officials. The voluntary MDAs will fund engaged or married couples on a three to one federal match basis to save for home purchases, education and small business expenses. The program also provides marriage and relationship counseling on a voluntary basis. Norton, who has long been a leader on Black family issues said she welcomed the program because of the growth of “never married mothers,” which has become the African American norm with 70% of Black children born to women who have never been married, and desire marriage, but “have declining prospects for marriage.” The major issue in declining marriage in the African American community, she said, is the indisputable data showing that the children with both parents have markedly better life chances. “In Black America, the issue is in an extreme state — not family dissolution or divorce, but the failure to form families at all through marriage, often with devastating consequences for Black children.” Norton described Brownback’s proposal “as an attempt to find an effective way into this vexing matrix of issues, and anyone who cares about the resulting problems of millions of Black children will find the proposal fully compatible with the values of all Americans and of both parties.” However, she warned that the District needs to be a full partner in implementation, and that without specific involvement of the appropriate D.C. officials and staff, the District government will not be able to learn how to incorporate the experience of the program into its many programs for children and parents and “the unintended appearance is created of a program imposed on the city rather than one it accepts.” Norton said Marriage Development Accounts reinforce her work with the Commission on Black Men and Boys she established to address the unique problems of African American males as a way to strengthen the Black family and the quality of life for African American children. An Action Plan is being developed to guide the public and private sectors of the local community in addressing these problems. Norton, who has worked closely with Brownback for years, did not mince words on why some were skeptical about a proposal on marriage for D.C. from a Republican Senator. She said that African Americans were sensitive about talk of marriage “considering the wounds to Black family life, from societal racism and official government policies alike.” She admonished Congress for “destroying the prospects for repairing African American family life [through] mandatory minimums and sentencing guidelines that have left a generation of non-violent drug pedaling young Black men with felony records that doom their personal life chances, passing on to the African American community at-large the destruction of the most cherished part of the legacy of our forefathers — the Black nuclear and extended family tradition that even slavery and vicious discrimination could not destroy.” Norton recommended several changes in the proposal, which Brownback said he would be happy to consider. The full text of Norton’s testimony follows.

***Mr. Chairman, I appreciate indicative of the hard work and attention you have given to District matters ever since you were chair of the Senate D.C. authorizing subcommittee during your first term. We thank you for your continued assistance to the city and its elected officials as the new chair of the D.C. Appropriations subcommittee, particularly your principled respect for the city’s right to self government as American citizens, continuing the laudable pattern set by your predecessors as chair, Senators Hutchison and DeWine, and, of course, Senator Stevens, the prior Appropriations Committee chair. We also are grateful to Senator Mary Landrieu, ranking member throughout the same years who has established a strong record of service to the District. May I also say that I appreciate your willingness to hold an upcoming hearing on a proposal for high school attendance using federally funded vouchers outside of the District of Columbia before taking any such action, which is strongly opposed by all our elected officials and by most D.C. residents. Mayor Tony Williams has asked me to say that he supports the Marriage Development Accounts (MDAs) you have proposed under discussion here today. He says he will be calling on you soon concerning a home rule issue of importance to the city in the current D.C. appropriation for action at the conference. I am pleased to offer my views on your provision for 100% federally and privately funded voluntary marriage and pre-marriage development accounts. However, if I may be candid, Mr. Chairman, there is some skepticism about marriage accounts as proposed for the District of Columbia by a Republican Senator, reflecting perhaps mainly six concerns: government action outside of its traditional public sphere of interest; federal funds specifically for marriage, a private, even intimate institution; the necessity of some partners to end a marriage, particularly when there is emotional or physical abuse; competition for the prudent use of scarce public resources for proven strategies; the political or ideological use of the issue of marriage in some quarters; and, of course, the long-existing racial sensitivity of African Americans about family matters considering the wounds to Black family life, from societal racism and official government policies alike. Notwithstanding some questions about the proposal that I believe should be answered, I believe the marriage development accounts you propose do not implicate these concerns, but instead hold considerable promise. I want, therefore, to address two areas — why I think action by the federal government is warranted and desirable, and why I believe your proposal is an appropriate step to be taken at this time. Wherever people may stand on marriage as an institution for the benefit of two people, the richly documented and

consistent evidence of the advantages in life chances of every variety that flow to children from reasonably happy marriages cannot be doubted. Yet the global decline of marriage and the growth of poor, single mother-headed families is too striking to ignore, leave aside the difficulties faced by one parent alone, even with ample means, in raising children today. The reasons for marriage decline are complicated and multiple and they often differ by nation and by subgroup, but effective interventions are so rare as to escape notice, whether from church, and sad to say, or from state and, for that matter, all the institutions in between. The expert witnesses you have invited no doubt will detail the quite astonishing and disturbing statistical picture, the unacceptable effects on children, and the kinds of proposals that have emerged. I want to focus on the necessity to begin to get a grip on family and marriage issues that defy the usual remedies. I believe that your proposal chooses a significant path into this issue. I have been concerned about the growth of female-headed families of every race and ethnic group since the early 1970s, when I noticed what seemed to me even then to be particularly intolerable figures showing one-third of African American children born to single mothers, most of them poor or near poor. My main concern since then has been with the frightening growth of never married mothers, which has become the norm with 70% of Black children born to such women who have never been married and have declining prospects for marriage. In Black America, the issue is in an extreme state — not family dissolution or divorce, but the failure to form families at all through marriage, often with devastating consequences for Black children. The growth of female-headed households is acute for white and Hispanic families as well, but I have concentrated my efforts on African American families, where the problems are most advanced and serious, and on encouraging Black national, local, and community leadership on the high voltage issue of the Black family. In 1985, the New York Times Magazine published an article by me entitled “Restoring the Traditional Black Family” that I believe was the first major piece on the subject that had appeared in a national publication since the Moynihan Report stirred controversy in 1965. I reread this piece recently and found that it could have been written today. I ask to submit it for your record. Today, I am pleased that every major African American organization has Black family issues on its agenda, not only the traditional fallout issues of family dissolution or failed family formation, such as assuring welfare reform that meets the community’s needs, food stamps, rehabilitative juvenile crime, education for disadvantaged children, and similar important matters. Only beginning with the New Deal did the federal government acknowledge any federal responsibility to do what was necessary when a single parent is unable to meet the basic needs of children, even for food and shelter. However, we still do not know how to confront the threshold issue of the failure of viable marriages and families and of the disappearance of marriages that might prevent many of the problems that the children of these families, and now, the government and our society both face. Marriage and family issues are at once breathtaking in their societal scope and yet highly individual and personal. These issues do not easily suggest discrete paths that invite governmental action and remedies. Your proposal, Mr. Chairman, is an attempt to find an effective way into this vexing matrix of issues, and anyone who cares about the resulting problems of millions of Black children will find the proposal fully compatible with the values of all Americans and of both parties, and will conclude that your proposal is the kind of offer that we cannot afford to refuse and are pleased to accept.

To your credit, Mr. Chairman, when we both spoke recently at a Brookings forum on marriage, you did not inflate the idea of MDAs, but said, “We can’t find a tested model around the country, but let’s start trying.” Trying is the least we owe a problem where every responsible institution has failed — federal and local government, churches and other religious institutions, and the families primarily responsible for their own children. I see in your proposal, Mr. Chairman, a possible hypothesis that at least has been partially demonstrated in the past. We know that in this country, people tend to delay marriage in poor economies, for example, during the Great Depression, and we know that today many young people are marrying later for perhaps a number of reasons, but certainly including economic reasons apparent in evidence such as the numbers who move back or stay in housing with their parents and the shift in the cost of a college education to students through loans that must be repaid by the students themselves, often without any significant parental assistance. Without simplifying the many reasons for marriage decline among Blacks in particular, I believe there are large economic disincentives to marriage for many African Americans that MDAs might directly address, including responsibility for housing for a family and the difficulty of continuing with training or education while assuming family responsibilities. Your proposal would encourage engaged or married couples to save for a home, job training or education, or to start a business. Moreover, you are wise in not trying to do this on the cheap, but instead use a 3:1 match that makes the incentive to save from limited incomes genuine. The counseling component that the proposal wisely provides is essential to its success, including life skills training, such as how to budget in order to be able to save, and marital and premarital counseling. I welcome the participation of the clergy and faith-based organizations, but hope that the proposal does not envision paying ministers to fulfill the ministerial obligation of marriage counseling, although training of ministers in the non-religious components of such counseling would be appropriate in my view. Funding the inevitably religious content of marriage counseling by ministers is unwise and unnecessary, and would needlessly implicate First Amendment separation of powers issues and invite litigation, an invitation that national and local organizations here would almost surely accept. In any case, I am sure that most ministers here would themselves be the first to say that a minister of the Gospel should not be paid for doing his Christian duty to encourage and reinforce marriage through marriage counseling paid for by the federal government. The reward for clergy, of course, would be to get young people to desire to be counseled in a religious setting. In any case, notwithstanding faith-based efforts, professional counseling by experts trained in psychology or counseling is necessary to ensure that couples are always focused on the marriage goal and not only the resources provided by the program, that domestic and emotional coercion or violence is absent, and that for both partners, the process is not only voluntary as required, but is seen by them as a commitment they want to share and an opportunity to move on to another productive stage in life together.

There are several questions I hope this hearing and further work will clarify. For example, the proposal also includes single people of both sexes as young as 16. Since the singles must remain single and childless, perhaps the point is to help prevent early pregnancy and fatherhood, which, of course, furthers the marriage emphasis of

the large proposal, but the goal for singles is not explicitly stated. It also is not clear how the proposal would handle the savings and match of a childless man or woman who starts as single, but marries at 20, for example. The proposal pre-selects grantees, at odds with federal government and District competitive requirements practices, and moreover, as far as I can tell, does not allow for any direct participation or oversight by District government officials and experts who have the best and most extensive experience and knowledge about the target population. I believe, Mr. Chairman, you perhaps wanted to assure that the program would be implemented by organizations with some relevant experience, such as the Capital Area Asset Building Corporation, which has a track record using individual development accounts in the District and elsewhere. May I suggest, however, that an important role for the District also be written into the law for two reasons even beyond the District government's valued experience. The District needs to be a full partner in learning from the proposal what it can do with its own resources to further family formation and stable marriages through its own agencies and existing programs. Second, I have spoken with the Mayor and Chair of the City Council and they accept this proposal as beneficial. Without specific involvement of the appropriate officials and staff of the District of Columbia government, the unintended appearance is created of a program imposed on the city rather than one it accepts.

The summary of the proposal I received did not provide for an evaluation or study of either the functioning or the results of the program. You said during your Brookings remarks, "Help us to design what it is that we should measure so that we can look at it, consider it, think about it, see if this is the right way." Because I believe that the proposal is promising and may prove replicable to the further benefit of the District and to other jurisdictions, I strongly recommend that a credible, control study be provided in the legislation. I do not believe that this or other governmental efforts to encourage stable marriages will gain traction without such studies.

Finally, your proposal, Mr. Chairman, has special appeal to me, because of my own work with the District with a Commission on Black Men and Boys I initiated in 2001, composed of men from our community with credibility with Black men and D.C. residents. The purpose of the Commission is to enable the local community to develop an Action Plan for achievable steps to be taken by the public and private sectors and by families of every structure and make-up, and to intensify the focus of families and of public and private entities on children. The hearings of the Commission have been uniquely eye-opening and have drawn residents in large numbers who normally do not attend government hearings. With the help of the House Government Reform Committee on which I serve, which has held its own Commission on Black Men and Boys hearing, an Action Plan outline based on the Commission's hearings has been completed. An enlarged Commission and its advisory body of experts will shortly embark on the next phase of its work.

Mr. Chairman, I believe that you and I are trying to do the same thing — to try effective ways to approach family and marriage instability. I have focused on Black boys and men because I believed that one important way to get a hold of Black family deterioration is to focus on this vital and equal partner to whom little attention has been given. Black family decline will continue if we do not face issues facing Black men and boys in work and in preparation for work, in pursuit of education, in incarceration, in reentry from prison, in juvenile justice, and in the perils of street life and gun and drug running.

In the United States, we have given considerable attention to almost all of these issues as they affect girls, with demonstrable success, such as reduction in teen pregnancy while boys continue to father children with little attention paid to how to approach this partner in the African American family with equal responsibility for their children. We blithely ignore and perpetuate the causes of a devastating gap that militates against African American family formation — the growth in the number of Black women ready for marriage and children, and the decline of marriageable Black males. No cause of this gap that is destroying the prospects for repairing African American family life is greater than the mandatory minimums and sentencing guidelines that have left a generation of non-violent drug pedaling young Black men with felony records that doom their personal life chances, passing on to the African American community at-large the destruction of the most cherished part of the legacy of our forefathers — the Black nuclear and extended family tradition that even slavery and vicious discrimination could not destroy.

Your proposal accepts the underlying theory of the Commission on Black Men and Boys. Put my way, in a country that has always associated manhood with money, men without legitimate resources and decent ways to achieve them in the ordinary way will not form stable families today. Black family deterioration began with problems that directly affected Black men in particular. The rapid flight of decent paying, manufacturing jobs beginning in the late 1950s correlates almost exactly with the beginning of steep Black family decline. It was then that men without jobs began to resist forming families as their fathers had always done. They did find access to money and to their sense of manhood through the drug economy, the underground economy and the gun economy, all of which moved into African American communities to replace the legitimate jobs of the traditional economy that had disappeared.

Mr. Chairman, when you chaired the Senate D.C. authorizing committee, you and I worked together to achieve the D.C. tax incentives that have proved so successful in the District that I am trying to renew them this year. I was encouraged by the partnership you and I achieved then. I am ready and willing to work with you now on one of society's most difficult problems. Thank you for being willing to engage this toughest of challenges.